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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to define leadership through "followership." The paper begins by defining "leader," "follower," and "symbiosis." It explores: what followers do; what followers want; and what followers and leaders expect from each other. From these perspectives, the paper presents a rationale for how leadership and followership should be integrated into leadership development to maximize a symbiotic relationship. It uses John Gardner's definition of leadership because it communicates the inherent aspect of communication between leaders and followers and focuses on persuasion or reward rather than force as the driving motivation for both the leader and the follower. The paper points out that modern trends in organizational structures and management practices have attempted to capitalize on the principles of teamwork and redefine the relationship of leader and follower, but that these newer approaches to leadership have had their critics, and that there is little solid research to support the theories. Nevertheless, the paper suggests a pedagogical approach to a leadership development program for freshmen based on humanistic values which enhances both the leader and the follower. Offered are activities and exercises of skills associated with the follower's role and the identified framework; as a goal, the aim is the development of role models who demonstrate followership skills that prepare them for leadership. Contains 19 notes. (NKA)

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Defining Leadership Through Followership: Concepts for Approaching Leadership Development

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lead|er (lēd´ər) *n* — a person or thing that leads: directing, commanding, or guiding head, as of a group or activity.
fol·low|er (fäl´ō ər) *n* — a person who follows another's beliefs or teachings; disciple.
sym·bi·o|sis (sim'bi ō'sis) — the intimate living together of two kinds of organisms, esp. if such association is of mutual advantage.[1]

Leaders do not exist without followers and followers do not exist without leaders. Note withstanding this obvious statement, the preponderance of leadership literature has focused on leaders with little or rare attention to the importance of understanding followers and followership. Historically, this literary direction is traceable to the early constructs of the term "leaders" as a set of personality traits or characteristics. When viewed from this perspective, the *relationship* is rarely considered except for the consequences of the specific leadership traits on the followers. These early trait views of leadership suggested a cause and effect of leaders' behaviors on followers. We should recognize a greater reciprocity between these two roles and acknowledge that modern concepts of leadership are not fully understood without appreciating followers and followership. Even more so, the contemporary development of leadership requires development of followership.

The purpose of this article is to examine followership. The dimensions explored are: (a) What followers do; (b) what followers want; and (c) what followers and leaders expect from each other. From these perspectives, a rationale is presented for how followership and leadership should be integrated into leadership development to maximize a symbiotic relationship.

Leadership is a topic that has attracted a great deal of writing and discussion. Like many overused and extended topics, it has lost much of its shape through use in so many contexts. For this discussion, John Gardner's definition of leadership is a suitable framework: "Leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers." [2] This is an attractive definition for it communicates the inherent aspect of communication between leaders and followers and focuses on persuasion rather than force or reward as the driving motivation for both the leader and follower.

To Gardner's leadership framework, we add the understanding that both leaders and followers choose to function in their specific roles. Leadership and followership imply a reciprocal relationship between those who choose to lead and those who choose to follow. This view distinguishes leaders from bosses or managers and distinguishes followers from subordinates or employees. As Gardner observed, "executives are given subordinates; they have to earn followers." [3] And he adds, "leadership is conferred by followers."[4] Hence, the relationship is a form of a covenant, often not explicitly expressed, that defines the nature of each role.

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With these constructs in mind, we can begin to analyze the relationship from the point of view of the follower. We begin by offering observations of the follower's motivations and expectations.

What Followers Do

By definition, followers are characterized in the relationship with leaders by their predisposition to be led. In their classical work, Hersey and Blanchard, while focusing on the strategies of the leader, describe four levels of follower readiness.

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Level One: Followers with low job maturity and low psychological maturity,
Level Two: Followers with low job maturity and high psychological maturity;
Level Three: Followers with high job maturity and low psychological maturity;
Level Four: Followers with high job maturity and high psychological maturity.[5]

To Hersey and Blanchard, these levels dictate the actions of the leader. From the perspective of analyzing the follower, these levels suggest several characteristics worthy of note. Followers:

- *Acknowledge some limitations of self.* Whatever action the leader proposes, it resonates with the follower because he or she perceives a comparative inadequacy exists that is satisfied by the leader. These limitations are shaped by the context of the situation and level of the follower's self confidence. This describes a circumstance where a particular follower finds that for a particular context that the leader provides the guidance and direction the follower needs as compensation for his or her deficiency. There are several emphases in this statement. One is that each follower in a group may have different levels of perceived limitations. Another is that the follower may not actually have limitations but believes he or she does to need a leader. Modern leadership theory makes considerable note of this point in suggesting that one function of leaders is to empower followers and enhance their belief in their own abilities and self.

- *Subjugate their leadership urges.* To achieve his or her goals or pursue group determined goals, the follower must not be the leader. The follower may have excellent leadership skills but, for this context, agrees to set them aside for the leader to be the leader. To do so, the follower may accept that the group is in better hands with the leader than self or that certain long term gains will be realized in some future moment where the follower may assert leadership. For the follower, this is a decision of comparative worth in the relationship.

- *Trust.* Central to any discussion of leaders and followers is trust. This aspect may be the most significant and meaningful in the relationship. For trust to occur, the followers, to be followers, have some abiding faith that leaders will direct actions toward mutually beneficial gains and those will occur in an atmosphere where faith by the follower is sufficient (as opposed to countervailing pressures, measures of probability, or trade offs). *Trust* is another element based on perception. Followers operate from some level of trust though the trust may later be betrayed. Any number of examples remind that trust is a belief by the follower but that belief was manipulated by the leader (i.e., Hitler, Jim Jones, David Koresch).

What Followers Want

By definition, followers are people and have wants and desires of their own. David Berlew lists a number of interesting expectations of followers as people wanting a chance to:

- Be tested, to make it on one's own;
- Take part in a social experiment;
- Do something well;
- Change the way things are.[6]

Each of these opportunities drives the follower to work with the leader in a mutually satisfying relationship. We can argue that modern workers have elevated these expectations over previous generations and seem to show less loyalty to leaders unless their wants are satisfied. From William H Whyte's early description of the follower as the "organizational man," defined as a loyal and passive servant to management, through Thomas Wolfe's "me generation," to alphabet-descriptions of the "x-generation," followers evolved into self-focused independent people driven by satisfaction of their needs. Anecdotally, any reader can cite experiences from everyday experiences of encountering today's workers or students who seem to live only for the day and expect return beyond contribution.

Others would argue that the modern follower seeks a sense of personal worth, meaning for life and a possible legacy for existence on earth. The world is complex, often hostile, and propelling the follower to anonyme. He or she may long for self-actualization and identity. Howard Gardner calls them

"believers."[7] The most extreme "believer" migrates from group to group in search of the perfect solution. He or she seeks structure, a hierarchy, and a mission and looks to the leader for opportunity. The leader provides definition and frames meaning. Working to achieve mutual goals, creating an ennobling role, helping others find purpose elevates the human spirit. Followers follow for reasons, reasons of their own, and the leader provides satisfaction for those reasons.

What Followers and Leaders Expect from Each Other

Followers expect that leaders behave in ways they can respect and that earns their loyalty. Drawing on several research studies including their own, James Kouzes and Barry Posner found a reasonably stable list of the characteristics followers want from leaders. Most of the respondents expected leaders who were: Honest, competent, forward-looking, and inspiring. [8]

Each of these requires communication skills as part of the way the leader satisfies the expectations of the followers. Each is a characteristic formed in the mind of the follower and subject to the way the leader expresses the characteristic through language or actions.

Honesty is the most frequently chosen characteristic. Given followers' willingness to pursue the direction of leaders, they take risks measured by the perception of leader trustworthiness. Followers watch for the leader's actions and listen to his or her words for a sign of honesty. They may remain skeptical for long periods, building confidence in honesty slowly but abandoning that confidence in a single moment when the leader betrays honesty.

Followers also expect leaders can demonstrate competence, that their leaders know what they are doing. Leaders can manage that perception in ways that convince the followers of competence. Equally possible is the person who cannot create an impression of competence in spite of great skill or knowledge. Inherent to having competence is communicating confidence.

Competence is based on a myriad of observations from followers. Success is one way to meet the expectations of followers and probably one of the easiest to observe. Expertise in the groups' field of operation is another dimension of competence. Expertise is a perception of the skills, craftsmanship, or artistry of the leader. Followers often assume expertise by the leader's credentials or reputation without actually observing or experiencing them. Capability, a third aspect of competence, is execution of expertise.

The term "leader" implies direction and movement. Followers expect leaders to be forward-looking and action-oriented. As noted earlier, followers seek structure and meaning. The ability to communicate a desirable destination toward which the group should move is a critical part of inspiring followership.

The energy or enthusiasm that moves people to action comes from leaders who inspire followers. The leader can demonstrate all three of the previous characteristics but is not likely to get action without the emotional energy created from inspiring followers. Followers, want to feel that their work is meaningful, that there is a cause worth their work, and that they can find excitement and reward.

These views of followers require some caution not to describe them as if they are a homogeneous body. A significant body of research cautions that the followers' expectations and evaluation of leaders are shaped by the followers' personal characteristics. Variables such as dogmatism, value orientations, and other interpersonal compatibility measures have been found to make a difference in the followers' satisfaction with the leader and organizational commitment. [9] Others have found differences in risk-taking behavior, proactive vs. reactive thinking, and locus of control to have a mitigating influence on the followers' relationship with leaders. [10] Clearly, this is an area where further research about followers would be useful.

Leaders have expectations from followers. Intuitively, leaders can function best with followers who are cooperative, dependable, and loyal. Cooperation allows the leader to focus on the group as a unit rather than devoting time to directing individuals and their independent behaviors. Cooperation also suggests a level of conformity that increases the efficiency and the power of the group. Dependability relieves the

leader's need constantly to monitor task behaviors and devote more to meeting the expectations of the followers. Loyalty provides the leader with a measure of risk-taking. The more loyalty, the more the leader can move the group in mutually desirable directions and the more flexibility the leader has in redirecting the group when things go wrong or they face challenges in the relationship.

In meeting mutual expectations, leaders and followers form an interdependent power relationship in which control is shared. At the beginning we noted that leaders cannot exist without followers and vice versa. It is equally true that leaders cannot control followers without permission and vice versa. Power becomes a central element in the relationship that defines reciprocity. Followers grant leaders power to direct and leaders grant followers power to act in ways in which they did not fully realize they had the capacity.

Each uses or relinquishes power to satisfy their own needs while working to pursue common ends. As both followers and leaders pursues their needs, they find in each other a symbiotic relationship. James MacGregor Burns calls this "transformational leadership." [11] The symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers raises each to higher levels of functioning.

Implications for Developing Leaders and Followers

The leader and follower's purposes bound in pursuit of common ends become fused and the results are usually greater than the sum of their individual acts. The most vivid example of this symbiosis has been the Chicago Bulls professional basketball team. Forged as a team by their coach, Phil Jackson, the team excels beyond the contributions of any single player. In Jackson's text for followership, *Sacred Hoops*, he describes the importance of a team composed of followers and leaders, each with a specific role, a defined contribution, and the absence of a single leader: "At the heart of my vision was the selfless ideal of teamwork that I'd been experimenting with since my early days in the CBA. My goal was to vie everyone on the team a vital role— even though I knew I couldn't give every man equal playing time, nor could I change the NBA's disproportionate system of financial rewards." [12] The recently displayed loyalty of the key players and their coach, threatening to leave the game if they are not kept together, is testimony to the power of a symbiotic team where leadership and followership are in harmony and where needs are satisfied and mutual goals realized.

Modern trends in organizational structures and management practices have attempted to capitalize on the principles of teamwork and redefine the relationship of leader and follower. Modern leaders understand that power and control has to be shared and that extraordinary groups are teams with interchangeable leader/follower roles. Douglas Smith summarized this body of literature and trends in organizational performance:

> "In the twenty-first-century organization, all leaders must learn to follow if they are to successfully lead. Profound and continuing changes in technology, demographics, government, and economics have made the omniscient leader obsolete. Yes, leaders must continue to set direction, make tough decisions and choices, and inspire commitment from those who follow them. ... But that is no longer enough. Leaders at all levels and in all situations must pay close attention to situations in which their most effective option is to follow— not because the hierarchy demands that they 'obey,' but because performance requires them to rely on the capacities and insights of other people."[13]

Any number of theorists and practitioner have espoused the teamwork or shared leader/follower roles. Peter Senge's influence has been among the most significant in modern corporate models. His "learning organization" approach focuses on work environments in which individuals at all levels are enabled to acquire the skills and knowledge and authority to contribute to the vision and goals of the organization.[14] Senge's view of the future organization is one where everyone, designated leaders included, needs to be a constant learner, willing to listen and reflect on the ideas and advice of the other participants and subjugate his or her authority to the collective wisdom of the team. Even further out on this spectrum is Robert K. Greenleaf's model of the leader as servant. His views are derived from biblical themes and shaped by the idea that the way to lead is to serve. [15] Greenleaf's philosophy is that leaders must focus entirely on satisfying the needs of the followers and not self. Peter Block uses the term *stewardship* to advance the same concepts. [16] Stewardship captures the sense of the leader's responsibility to nurture the follower and balance power and accountability

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These newer approaches to leadership have had their critics. There is very little solid research to support their theories. Much of their supportive evidence is anecdotal and their concepts are idealistic. The concepts are also relatively new with few applications where one could observe them in practice or for long-term results. They have been criticized as too idealistic and in direct contrast to what usually is happening in business and industry.[17] The quintessential example of the juxtaposition of these theories and practices has made a millionaire out of Scott Adams, the creator of *Dilbert*.

Nevertheless, we believe that this is a view that represents humanistic values that should be fostered in our society. We believe our responsibility is to educate future leaders, responsive to the modern environment. Consequently, our own pedagogical approach to leadership development recognizes the value of followership. In our freshman leadership development program, we attempt to enhance both the follower and the leader. We believe that our students will have experiences in both leadership and followership roles where circumstances and opportunities will dictate which roll is the most appropriate. We hold that responsible followership is as important as leadership.

Our course is designed with attention to the follower role as well as the leaders' role. All of our activities are with "leaderless" groups except one program aspect, the Leadership Challenge Course. In each activity we bring to the students' attention the way leadership and followership moves quickly from person to person depending on the circumstances and the needs of the group. Even the Leadership Challenge Course, a rapid response course where each team member has at least one defined leadership responsibility and six challenges where followership is required.

In addition to a review and analysis of the follower's role and the framework identified in this paper's earlier section, these exercises and the activities associated with them are focused on skills important to the follower that can be developed in a structured environment. Drawing from Smith, we stress the importance of:

- Asking questions instead of giving answers or pronouncing solutions;
- Providing opportunities for others to lead the leader;
- Creating "sweat equity" in a team (i.e., contributing equal parts of hard work to the team's success instead of delegating all tasks); and
- Becoming a matchmaker instead of a "central switch" (i.e., helping team members find resources within the team without flowing requests through the leader).[18]

Hopefully, our approach of deliberately enhancing the "follower" skills and responsibilities of the individual is responsive to the dual role these people must perform in real life, in real organizations. Our goal is to develop role models who demonstrate followership skills that prepare them for leadership. As Smith observed: "Today, the people in an effective organization must both think and do, both manage others and mange themselves, both make decisions and do real work. ... Few people who only follow will contribute to such organizations. Nor will many who only lead. Instead, all must learn how to both lead and follow."[19]

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